

What Should Policymakers Know about Marriage and Relationship Education?

The changes in family trends that have occurred in recent decades have resulted in evermore complex and unstable family patterns. Currently, between 43% and 46% of marriages will end in divorce. More than one-third of all children are born to unmarried mothers. Cohabitation among unmarried couples has increased dramatically. As a consequence of these and other trends, about half of all children will reside at least temporarily in single-parent households, usually with their mothers. Further, one in three girls in the United States becomes pregnant by age twenty and half of all first out-of-wedlock births are to teenagers in the United States today. These changes have decreased child and adult well-being, increased child poverty, and placed a large financial burden on U.S. society.¹

This dramatic transformation in family structure has enormous public costs. The continuing high rates of family fragmentation have been a major cause of the escalating costs of federal and state programs such as welfare, paternity and child support, Medicaid, and numerous education, justice, health and social programs that attempt to alleviate family poverty and address its consequences. Moreover, since single parents earn less income, tax revenues are decreased. A study using conservative assumptions found that the estimated total public expenditures (federal, state and local) on reducing poverty and on



education and criminal justice programs associated with family fragmentation (divorce and non-marital childbearing) were at least \$112 billion per year.² (This study did not include estimates of the costs of single-father families, or program costs that could be indirectly attributed to family fragmentation.) Teen childbearing in the United States (80 percent is non-marital) cost taxpayers (federal, state and local) an estimated \$9.1 billion in 2004. Most of these costs were associated with programs for the children of teen mothers.³

In an effort to strengthen families and improve child well-being, in the late 1990s a handful of states began to fund healthy marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs. The states were soon followed by the federal government, which

1 Amato, P. (2008). Recent Changes in Family Structure: Implications for Children, Adults and Society. NHMRC Brief, <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/docs/changefamstructure.pdf>.

2 Scafidi, B. (2008). The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing. Institute for American Values. www.americanvalues.org.

3 Hoffman, S. (2006). By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing. National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. www.thenationalcampaign.org/costs/default.aspx.

launched a healthy marriage initiative in 2002 that funded MRE programming in entities such as state social services programs, community-based organizations including faith-based organizations, and private organizations. As a result, emerging promising practices and lessons learned from these entities are available to policymakers as they consider enhancing existing state service delivery systems to strengthen families or creating new infrastructure with the goal of strengthening families and improving child outcomes. This Brief is for state policymakers who are considering MRE as a strategy to strengthen families. It provides an overview of MRE programming that can aid policymakers in creating or enhancing family strengthening strategies in their states. A policymaker can include elected or appointed officials working in Federal, State or local government agencies, as well as judges, policy staff and high ranking agency administrators.

What is marriage and relationship education (MRE)? Marriage and relationship education includes flexible, evidence-based programming that can be used with a variety of populations such as teenagers, teen parents, single adults and/or adults who are in a committed relationship at any time throughout the life span. The skills taught help participants develop emotional intelligence as well as provide them with the tools to help sustain healthy relationships. Some of these include communication skills, conflict resolution tactics, identifying and regulating emotions, managing relationship expectations and being able to identify an abusive relationship. Beyond intimate partner relationships, these skills can have a positive impact on other professional and personal relationships. Most curricula were developed to be delivered in a group setting. Many relationship education curricula have been evaluated and found

to increase relationship satisfaction and improve communication and conflict resolution skills.⁴ This research also confirms that new behaviors and skills can be learned. Trained laypeople and volunteers can deliver the curriculum, making it cost effective.

Do healthy marriage and relationship programs work? Numerous studies, including meta-analytic reviews, confirm improved couple communication and higher rates of relationship satisfaction in couples who participate.⁵ In the few studies that have tracked long-term outcomes, there is some evidence of a lower likelihood of marital breakup.⁶ A new rigorous (random assignment) study found that fathers who participated in a couples-based program were more engaged with their children and had better relationships with their partners, and their children had fewer behavioral problems than a comparative group of men who participated in a fathers-only program.⁷ There is some emerging evidence that these interventions may help stabilize relationships, reduce domestic violence, and benefit children in the long term. Additional benefits believed to result from these programs include improvements in child well-being, empowering individuals to end violent or harmful relationships, and couples deciding not to marry if they are in an unhealthy relationship. Marriage and relationship

4 Ooms, T. and Hawkins, A. (2010). What Works in Marriage and Relationship Education? A Review of Lessons Learned with a Focus on Low-Income Couples. National Healthy Marriage Resource Center.

5 *ibid*

6 Ooms, T. (2005). The New Kid on the Block: What is Marriage Education and Does it Work? What is Marriage Education? Policy Brief. Center for Law and Social Policy. Available at www.clasp.org.

7 Cowan, P., Cowan, C., Pruett, M., Pruett, K., and Wong, J., (July 2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventative interventions for low income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

education can help individuals recognize the signs of physical and emotional abuse. The programs also serve as a gateway to get help for problems like substance use, depression and physical or emotional abuse. Finally, these programs may also increase the likelihood that participants will seek help later when they may face serious problems in their relationships.

Can healthy marriage and relationship programs be offered on a large scale to diverse populations? Yes, if there is a sufficient initial investment in program infrastructure and in building capacity to work with couples and to engage men and fathers. Many educators, human services agencies and practitioners are not oriented to working with men/fathers or with couples. Accordingly, when staff and administrators have received specific training and/or help with redesigning program and community outreach and operations to make them more geared toward men, they typically become more effective.

Who can best deliver these programs? A diverse number of organizations and groups in the public, nonprofit, for-profit and faith-based sectors are delivering MRE programs. Programs that are nested in an established, multi-service agency (e.g. Head Start or YMCA) often are able to help couples access other needed services more easily. However, programs that are “free-standing” may have more flexibility to design and implement creative new approaches to MRE programming.

Will couples and individuals attend MRE programs? Many programs have succeeded in achieving or exceeding their participation goals. These MRE programs are delivering a variety of services to populations at different ages and stages in life. Most have found that engaging men and

fathers in voluntary health, education and human services programs is more difficult than engaging women and mothers, so recruitment and marketing strategies targeted toward men are often needed

Is MRE relevant to teens? Teens benefit from relationship education because it teaches them to recognize the characteristics of a healthy relationship, become aware of what emotionally and physically abusive relationships look like, discover the qualities they desire in a romantic partner, and understand the economic, health and social benefits of having children after marriage. It also teaches them the essential conflict resolution and communication skills needed to succeed in interactions with others. Relationship education can be combined with teen pregnancy prevention programs.

What do individuals and couples say about participation? In participant surveys, focus groups and media interviews, and during testimony at committee hearings, MRE participant couples are generally enthusiastic about the group sessions and especially appreciate their relationship with facilitators and interacting with other couples. They report learning specific relationship skills such as communication and anger management, and parenting information, which improved their relationship with their partner and children. When asked what they would recommend to improve the program, the most frequent responses were to extend the services, cover more content and make the program more widely available to others.⁸

8 Dion, R., Avelar, S., Zaveri, H., Hershey, A., et al. Oklahoma Marriage Initiatives: A Process Evaluation. Final Report. Mathematica Policy Research Inc. Report submitted to ASPE/ DHHS May 23, 2008. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/OMI/ProcessEval/index.shtml>.

How does the domestic violence field fit in with marriage and relationship education? Domestic violence experts and experts in the MRE field agree that the two fields should work together to ensure that couples participating in MRE are not at risk for escalated violence. Government supported MRE programs have been required to consult with domestic violence experts to create program protocols and promote cross-training. This is a practice to be replicated.

Can programs effectively serve participants from diverse racial ethnic minority backgrounds?

The Administration for Children and Families has spearheaded efforts that encourage programs to be culturally responsive and has created independent healthy marriage initiatives for African Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders that can serve as a starting point for any state initiative. Healthy marriage and relationship programs are now being successfully delivered to all populations as well as to migrant and refugee families from numerous countries. (For more information, visit www.acf.hhs.gov.)

What kinds of partnerships and collaboration are needed for MRE programs to be

successful with disadvantaged couples and single parents? MRE programs need to create cooperative relationships with key institutions, programs and community groups to be successful and sustainable. Programs working in low-income communities especially need collaborative, mutual-referral relationships with the agencies and programs that provide the “hard concrete services” that low-income couples and single parents need (employment, job training, child care, housing, health care, etc.). They also need to address barriers to participation by providing on site child care, transportation and flexible hours. Collaborative

partnerships are also needed with other programs that provide “soft” services, namely programs that aim to strengthen parent/child and couple relationships and encourage responsible family formation. Along with MRE programs, these include responsible/engaged fatherhood services, teen and adult unintended pregnancy prevention, domestic violence prevention, child support and paternity, and early childhood intervention programs.

Policymakers, as a response to the social trends in the United States, have begun to champion and support MRE with the goal of strengthening families. Marriage and relationship education is showing promising results for individuals and couples. This evidence-based programming can be tailored to meet the needs of diverse populations, is cost-effective, and can be either integrated into existing family services or can be a stand-alone program. For more information, read [How can a State Policymaker Build Support for a Strengthening Marriage Agenda?](#) and [What can State Policymakers do to Strengthen Relationships and Marriages in their State?](#) Additional resources are available at www.healthymarriageinfo.org.

The National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NMREC) would like to thank Mary Myrick, APR, Theodora Ooms, MSW, Patrick Patterson, MSW, MPH, and Rachel Derrington, MSW, for their contribution to this Brief. We are grateful for the support provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This is a product of the NHMRC, led by co-directors Mary Myrick, APR and Jeanette Hercik, PhD and project manager, Rich Batten, ThM, MEd, CFLE.